EPA Guidance Notes

Water Margin Safety

Purpose

This document is designed to provide EPA Members and Aspirant Members with guidance on some key considerations to take into account when compiling organisational policy and operating procedures pertaining to safety around water margins and swimming on overseas expeditions.

Background

Unfortunately, year on year we hear about a number of deaths of young people caused by drowning. Some cases attract a lot of media attention particularly if the incident has taken place during an organised activity/educational trip.

Many expedition itineraries will take teams close to the water margins and participants may want or need to interact with them in order to, for example, collect water for drinking or cooking, to wash, or to bathe/swim. There are a number of benefits associated with the various water margin activities, but clearly there also exists a prominent potential risk.

It is the responsibility of the expedition provider to ensure they have a robust system for managing water margin activity in order to mitigate the potential hazards.

Key Operational/Safety Considerations

Expedition Providers must produce risk assessments and accompanying operating policies to address the risks associated with water margin activities. It is unrealistic to think that water margins can be avoided completely during most overseas expeditions, but the Provider should identify the level of risk their organisation is prepared to take; some providers may, for example, decide not to allow swimming at the water margin.

Consent

Providers shall ensure that parents and schools have access to risk management information pertaining to water margin safety in order that they can give informed consent for participant involvement. Information should be free of technical jargon and should aim to set realistic and accurate expectations.

EGN:001 - Version 1.0
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August 2015

Supervision

Providers must ensure that those who will be supervising participants are educated on the organisational policy and that they have the necessary competence to effectively carry out their supervisory responsibilities. The level of competence required to supervise will be entirely dependent on the environment, the ability of participants, and the nature of the water margin activity: the degree of supervision (and therefore related competence) for managing a group of young people paddling in the shallows of the shoreline is clearly different to that required of for those who are swimming beyond their depth in surf conditions.

Provider's should be clear on the type of supervision they expect from those who will be supervising water margin activity which, depending on the nature of activity, is likely to be either 'indirect' or 'direct' supervision.

Water margins are dynamic in nature and as such, those responsible for the supervision of participants will need to carry out a dynamic risk assessment prior to the commencement of any activity, accounting for the hazards associated with that specific venue on that particular day.

Group Management

The combined outcomes of the Provider's risk assessments and the dynamic risk assessment will dictate the group management requirements. For swimming and bathing activities, those in supervisory roles will also need to ascertain the swimming ability of the individual participants. Swimming ability may be declared prior to the expedition, but this should be verified in the field.

Prior to the commencement of any water margin activity, a clear and concise briefing should be given to participants so that they clearly understand their role in the risk management of the activity; such a briefing may include:

- Designating clear boundaries and any 'out-of-bounds' areas
- Defining a clear communications system appropriate to the environment. Note in some environments it may be difficult to maintain effective verbal communications
- Outlining significant hazards and associated control measures

It is clearly important for supervisors to form an emergency plan to implement should any incident occur. All participants should be briefed on the emergency plan and their role in it.

Environment

Providers should consider the types of water margin that their participants may encounter which may include rivers, sea, lakes, and swimming pools. Providers should identify the potential hazards associated with the varying environments and incorporate these into their risk assessment.

Some generic water margin hazards include:

- Weather at the venue
- Access to and from the water margin
- Depth of water
- Temperature of water
- Remoteness
- Water quality
- Other users

Where available, it is advisable to seek local knowledge to augment the dynamic assessment of the environment; trekking guides may, for example, have knowledge of dangerous wildlife or water-borne parasites in inland waters, and the owner of a hostel located near the beach may know of specific areas prone to rip currents or jellyfish.

Equipment

Providers should assess the need for the provision of any related safety equipment. If safety equipment is provided then it is essential that those who will be responsible for potentially deploying it are competent in doing so and that it is kept in serviceable condition.

Those in supervisory roles may be able to utilise improvised safety and rescue aids. The selection of these should be done in line with the supervisor's qualifications, experience and dynamic risk assessment.

References and Resources

British Standard 8848 – *Section 4. Risk Management* & *Section 5.4. Supervision*

OEAP National Guidance - *7o Natural water bathing* & *7x Swimming pools*

Royal Lifesaving Society UK - www.rlss.org.uk

DfES/CCPR- *Group Safety at Water Margins*

DfES – *Health and Safety of Pupils on Educational Visits (Chapter 8)*